

B 3227  
.E74 S4  
Copy 1



# IS THE UNIVERSE SELF-CENTRED OR GOD-CENTRED?

AN EXAMINATION OF THE SYSTEMS.  
EUCKEN AND BERGSON.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS  
DELIVERED TO THE  
SWEDENBORG SCIENTIFIC ASSOCIATION  
BY  
FRANK SEWALL, D. D.

*Compliments of the  
Author: Washington  
D.C.*

PHILADELPHIA, PA.  
SWEDENBORG SCIENTIFIC ASSOCIATION  
1913



B3227  
E74S4

## IS THE UNIVERSE SELF-CENTERED OR GOD-CENTERED?

The research, both of science and philosophy, at the present day, seems to be centered upon the subject of life—its origin and its nature. Running through the various theories proposed, there appears to be a common conception of life as a flow—a *flux*. The questions of efflux, a flow *from*; or of influx involving a flow *into* matter from something above; or of afflux—a flowing *toward* something; and what that something is,—these are all for the time quite overlooked in the interest centered upon the *flux* itself;—life a flow; consciousness a flow; all Being a flow.

It is an interesting coincidence that this doctrine of the flux should be the leading principle in the two philosophic systems that most widely occupy the thinking world to-day—those of EUCKEN and BERGSON.

While science, conscious of its limitations, contents itself with studying the processes, or the *flow* of life in nature, these philosophers would seem, at least, to desire to penetrate higher, and to arrive at the nature of life itself or of that which flows.

The question that especially interests us in the present discussion is—as to the origin and nature of the life as so conceived; in other words, in its center and source. Is it God-derived or self derived? Is it an influx or flow from the Divine Love and Wisdom, as a Spiritual Sun or Life-center, into nature and into man? or is it a product of nature itself evolving both man and his God?

EUCKEN.

It would seem, indeed, at first glance, as if both these philosophers had found the world centered in something above nature and above self. Both find our world, our individual life, encompassed in a universal flow of something quite distinct from gross or inert matter. Eucken calls it the Spirit, or an "activity and Power encompassing and transcending the world;" a life that we discern "different from the life of the

#### FOUR

senses" and that we perceive as a "whole," "whose products are Truths, Goodness, Beauty," which rise into a "realm of inwardness."

This life, says Eucken, is "not a creation of man alone," since "it must come *to* him from the universe." So it is the universe seeking or creating its centre rather than the centre, the universe. It must, says Eucken, "form a new stage of reality into which man, who first belongs to nature, is raised in the progres of his life."

This same seeming separation of the natural and the spiritual degrees or orders,—followed by their commingling and their reduction to a common human or material level,—is apparent throughout Eucken's entire system, if such his arbitrary construction of theology and religion can be called.

"Spiritual energy in civilization has power (he declares) only in a revelation of an independent spiritual world." Here, he says, is the threshold of religion. "All spiritual creation, moral action, artistic production, appears to be found in the living presence of a higher Power."

Hence comes the "Universal Religion." It encompasses all life instead of making a separate realm from which comes a "peculiar influence." But it is through the *peculiar* influences,—*i. e.*, I suppose, the consciously personal and individual experiences of this universal religious flow,—that there comes to be a "Characteristic Religion," and this is first reached through the checks, the shocks that human life exhibits, like the collision of atoms in the world's evolution. Spiritual life is roused to a conception of Deity, and, in "developing its relation to the Divine, engenders a Characteristic Religion."

Here we have an adroit almost amusing adaptation of the law of evolution by the collision of material particles, to the evolution of the religious sense, and so, finally, of the idea of God, as if the thought of God were not necessarily the very *spring* of all religious conception and action as such, and not their outgrowth; as if, again, the circumference can create its centre,—not as something that has necessarily been there all the time, but as something that for the individual now first

exists, thus concentrating the universal religious flow into an individual experience.

Eucken goes on to show how, at the apex of man's rise, there comes the approach of Deity to man; and this, as not limited to "occasional points of contact!" That is, as I understand him, not in single Incarnations. God makes man the partaker of the fulness of His own life: "its deepest mystery is that the Divine enters into the Human without losing its divinity." "Man becomes immediately conscious of the infinite and eternal, of what transcends the world."

It would be interesting to know just on what facts in recorded human experience Eucken is basing this sweeping statement. Surely it is not what the history of all primitive revelations declares; nor is it the experience of the average man of to-day as we know him, to be "intuitively conscious of the infinite and the eternal and of what transcends the world." When Revelation has awakened in the mind these thoughts and images, then man becomes more or less conscious of them; but never, so far as we learn from history, only of his immediate consciousness. If it be objected that Revelation itself is the means of an immediate or intuitive vision and inward hearing on man's part—this would upset the theory of Eucken, because it would assert the "Characteristic or individual Religion" as the origin, instead of the "universal stuff or flow, out of which this individual religion is supposed to be gradually engendered.

In the same fanciful vein Eucken continues that the "love of God becomes the ruling motive of the man's life, and brings him an inner relation with the whole scope of reality." Truly a marvellous result of a purely self-conceived image of the infinite and the eternal or the coming into man's life of the universal religious flow; for he asserts that this flow "must all remain human and a part of the *Universal Religion*." "If it cuts itself off in a peculiar religion and evolves a specific piety it easily sinks into rigidity and pharisaic conceit." Dogmas and rites, he says, are expressions of their types of spiritual life, but should be constantly changeable to meet the great transformations taking place in the world of thought.



"While we criticize the tradition of forms, we must develop the *essence of religion* more vigorously and bring the new life which unfolds itself in religion into full action and transform it into our own life. This will protect us against all paralyzing doubt!" and "give us a sure foothold on the storms of the age. Life and its activity alone can produce a Religion of life!"

There must be, he says, an "impartial criticism." "Such criticism does not lead to disintegration when it proceeds from the kernel of religion itself, instead of from the outside." But since all comes from the "outside," we are compelled to ask here, why not criticism from the "outside?" Where is the kernel of religion but in the "outside," the flow? Especially if the flow when arrested by dogma and piety into "character religion" becomes thereby vitiated or contracted?

Swedenborg has told us that "all religion has to do with life and that the life of religion is to do good. But the good he clearly defines as something in accord with the revealed will of a Being of perfect love and wisdom,—this revelation being in the form of precepts, or commandments laying down man's duty toward God and toward the neighbor, which are to be obeyed in the common acts of life. It seems much like a strain of high-sounding but empty words—this talking of doubt being cured by a religion with no permanent convictions and no teaching; and of a new life being entered into, by establishing the self-engendered Deity in the centre of one's being and as identical with one's self. For, that every aid from tradition, or external rite or a recognized supernatural, whether in a Gospel or a miraculous birth and resurrection and historic redemption, is to be utterly cast aside, is one of Eucken's most emphatic demands. To worship Jesus, he says, "would be the intolerable deification of a human being!"

Eucken, therefore, has no need of a central Lord of Life or Divine Redeemer other than the God conceived of as a powerful, a loving "Omnipresence that enters into life with its reinforcing redeeming effects."

The Virgin birth of our Lord is rejected and therewith the Resurrection and Ascension. Only the human Jesus remains, His incomparable life and His teaching of the dignity of man as the child of God.



"The Virgin birth (says Eucken) is as irrelevant to the faith and a living Redeemer as is the empty grave."

Throwing away, in this manner, all the Church's strongholds of a divine Revelation and a heavenly Doctrine, Eucken offers, after all, little besides a flow of eloquent phrases and poetic fancies for the final refuge of the human soul seeking rest in a rational conviction or a spiritual faith:

"I admit (he says) the waters of the surface are all against religion; but the under currents of man's soul are all in its favor. Modern culture has given us many a problem for which it is, (itself), no match!

"This yearning and craving amid the unwholesomeness of a secular merely human culture, the intolerable shallowness of life which cannot reach beyond its circuit, this rush to a first principle without love or without soul,—how do you account for them?

"On the other side, the profound longing for greater stability and permanence! This yearning to partake of the 'higher life' than that which the process of natural or social self-preservation will allow us!

"Believe me, this incessantly growing impulse running through all nations and all civilizations of the East and of the West is in itself a proof that powers are at work in our souls of which our critics will have to give account!"

Which is somewhat of an anticlimax; inasmuch as no critic will be more called to account for this mental unrest than he who, like Eucken himself, has cast aside all objective aid and supernatural authority, and trusted himself only to the undirected and turbulent "flow" of purely natural self-evolved religion. How almost pitiful is the adoption of this stagelike artificial tone of a pious humility and dependence which it is the object of the entire argument to destroy as a thing only of the past!

"We are seekers! (he says) our achievements are not perfect yet!" Is he in earnest here, or is it quite innocently, that he introduces this bit of satire out of Goethe's Faust,—where Wagner, the student, says to the master—"I know much! Still I would know all!"

"We are serving (says Eucken), a great end which is not the creation of our brains, but set up for us in the process of evolution!"

Why not let it be a "creation of our brains"—if the "process" is all the cause of the great end which we are to serve!

## EIGHT

"We are partakers of the work of the Spirit: nothing can be in vain if done with a view to our great end and a faithful fulfillment of our task."\*

But how can a man do anything with a view to one's "great end," or with a view to a "task," which end and task have never had an existence prior to their evolving in human experience, and have never been made known by revelation to man; nor ever can be known as a finality, but only as a guess or an assurance for the time being?

To sum up Eucken's position, it would seem to be that we are in an inmost flow of spirit seeking a centre or divine, instead of being ourselves in the outer sphere recipients of the influx from an eternal, all-forming, all-sustaining Divine within. But that this so-called spirit is other than a refinement of matter, or of the unintelligent, would seem to follow from the proposition that it is only through a process of evolution that it attains to these qualities and enters upon the realms of mind and morals and the finally-to-be-evolved divine.

### BERGSON.

To turn from Eucken to the other acknowledged leader of the philosophic thought of the day, Professor HENRI BERGSON, of the College of France, it is a relief to handle principles which are honestly held out without any garb of religious affectation, and which yet are quite as serviceable for arriving at a reason of religion as are those of more sanctimonious name.

BERGSON is thoroughly honest, plain-spoken and fearless in the announcement of his ideas, and his very system guarantees his boundless freedom in carrying them to a result, inasmuch as all systems, all knowledge, all life, all reason itself is only, according to him, forever in the making; never made, never complete,—not even known or completed in thought beforehand. Life is the flow of an eternal now, which is eternally new because made up anew each instant of all the past, and so shaping, controlling anew, all the future.

In the place of Eucken's flow of "spirit" and of "universal

---

\*For the above extracts, see Rudolf Eucken. London. 1911.  
*Notes for Religion and Life.*

religion," Bergson unfolds to us the flow of universal vital impulse, the *elan vital* which seems to consist, at first, of purposeless motion, but which acquires purpose, character, plan, anticipation from its constantly new relations to its counterpart in the universal being—*inert matter*. This affords the reaction, the bumps and shocks and turnings which shape the vital impulse into character, or consciousness; this consciousness, in turn, struggles against its confining shell of matter, until here and there it bursts through into a realm of freedom from restraint,—and so into a domination over matter itself. This is reason and the free intellect, and in its freedom it becomes creative and each new moment of consciousness is the birth of a new world.

Thus what is given as presupposed in Bergson is a dual world or an existence of two elements, *vital impulse* and the crust or covering of *inert matter*.

The whence of these he does not trouble himself about except negatively, inasmuch as his very system requires that God or the End, Purpose, and Plan of the Universe could never have existed at the beginning, since it is only coming into being, or shaping itself, as it goes along. As our consciousness, our life, our destiny is not promised for us beforehand—is not "ready-made"—but is always in the making, so is God, as intention, conceived of as the End or shaping destiny of the world also always in the making.

It is this freedom from any restraint, whether of an original plan or of a present control, that, according to Bergson, brings the long-desired solution of the problem how to reconcile man's freewill with a course, preordained from the beginning. The solution is in the bringing of the entire universe, all life and being, to its centre in the individual self which is conscious only of the now. This again is evolving the centre from the circumference and making the universe self-centered rather than God-centered.

However deficient and revolutionary this system may seem in its relation to traditional thought and belief, there will be found in it points of deepest interest to the student of Swedenborg, as they seem to unite in a way, in opening to the

philosopher, a new stand-point for a universal world-view and a real advance in spiritual thinking.

While nothing could be farther from Swedenborg than the abolishing of a God of infinite love and mercy as the source of all things and as determining and governing all things by predetermined laws of Order, still when we come to analyze the idea of the past and the future as terms of time and not of eternity and think of God from the latter idea, or as the *eternal now*, we may find a reconciliation between what seemed before only conflicting ideas. If the soul's consciousness of the "now" embraces all its finite being, why should not the consciousness of the Infinite embrace eternity in its now, and behold all as present?

Unquestionably Bergson's idea of freedom as that of the vital impulse breaking more and more through the bonds of inert matter is entirely in accord with Swedenborg's teaching of the reverse process of God's self-limitation in the evolution of human freedom; so that, like the Father to the Prodigal, He divides his living among his sons, and that only so, out of a society of souls conscious of themselves as free, could God build up really a heaven to eternity.

The meaning of this freedom as a factor in evolution, and perpetual creation all lies in the conception of time and of "the now."

There is, according to this idea, no past and no future in man's actual life, nor will there ever be; man's whole life is in the consciousness of the now and this is the product of all the past and, the womb out of which springs the future, but a future of perpetual new births.

Especially interesting to the student of Swedenborg's psychology is Bergson's doctrine of the nature and the function of the memory as building up the now, out of the past, and as thus constituting a kind of perpetual limbus or spiritual body which shall preserve our identity. Duration, (*la Durée*) does not suggest a distinct past still existing, or a distant future; it is merely the perpetual flow, in the present moment, of the past into the future. Time is constructed by the aid of memory out of this duration by an *intellectual* effort; but the more real



life is not this intellectually created and formed world of time, but the world intuitively felt in the ever recurring now.

It is easy to see how this all bears upon the doctrine of predestination, and of the eternity of the heavens or the hells. The fixed "intellectual" terms of time are to be translated—as affecting our real conscious life—into the intensive terms of state. As to memory, according to Bergson:

"Memory adds continually to present state and so forever builds anew.

"Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and moulds, as it advances.

"The past is not put away; it follows us up at every instant.

"We think with only a small part of our past, but we desire, will and act, with our entire past our entire bent of soul.

"Our duration is irreversible; we can see our memory from our intellect but not from our will." Compare with Swedenborg's Doctrine of the external and internal memory. (*H. H.* 462-469.)

"What we *do* depends upon what we *are*: we *are* also what we *do*, and so we are creating ourselves continually." "To exist is to change."

Bergson's doctrine of the soul's Immortality affords, perhaps, better than any other one feature, a basis of comparison and of valuation—by the side of other systems. There would seem, at first glance, to be a distinctly Christian idea in this placing of will higher than thought, this making the interior and will-memory the enduring one, and making the life to consist in the deed rather than in the thinking about it. What could be more graphic, more refreshing, frank and bold than this description of the relation of life and nature.

"All organized beings from humblest to highest, from first origins to now, everywhere and always, evidence a single impulsion—the *inverse* of the movement of matter, and in itself indivisible. All the living hold together and all yield to the same tremendous push; the animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality, and the whole of humanity in space and time is one immense army, and all spring, beside and before and behind each one of us, in one overwhelming charge, able to beat down every resistance and clear the most formidable obstacles: perhaps even death!" (p. 27).

Here we seem to have an intimation at least of personal survival after death, as possible. But here again we are to be disappointed, as throughout Bergson's entire system, by the

## TWELVE

return of the fatal blight of Orientalism with its doctrine of the final absorption of the individual into the whole.

Regarding personal immortality, he says:

"If there are souls capable of independent life, whence do they come? When do they enter into this body arising from a mixed cell derived from the bodies of parents?

"We can answer only by resolving to see the life of *the body just where it really is on the road that leads to the life of the spirit; but it will there* have no longer to do with *definite* living beings" (ibid, p. 269). That is, the personality is lost!

"Life, as a whole, from the initial impulsion that thrust it into the world will appear as a wave which rises and is opposed by the descending movement of matter. This opposition drives it into a vortex; it divides it into distinct individualities. Then souls are continually being created, which, nevertheless, in a certain sense pre-existed.

"Souls are nothing else than little rills into which the drive of life sunders itself, flowing through the body of humanity."

So we come back to only a familiar form of Orientalism.

What is unique about Bergson's philosophy is that it asserts the doctrine of the flux as belonging not only to everything else, but even to his own system;—if that can be called a system which is momentarily changing, and is building itself up, not on a foreseen plan, but on a plan that develops from stage to stage. The end of this development seems, in Bergson, to be the sad end of the pessimist—the dissolution into the original formless but creative life-impulse; and so the loss of all individual immortality. But why, if all things change, may not Bergson's vision change as to the end of life's prospect? Why may he not rise, too, to the conception and conviction of the motive of creation itself as nothing less than the Infinite Love desiring to provide for man a heaven to eternity?

### CONCLUSION.

Finally, as to the spiritual content to be found in either of these two popular systems.

We must define, first of all, what we mean by "spiritual." If spirit is a refined order of ether; or a kind of spermatic dust scattered through the universe; or a "universal religious sense" of a supernatural that is capable of producing a God and destroying him to be replaced by another,—then both of

these systems have this content not only in abundance but to the full—as the very working principle of the evolution of a centre from the expanse, or of reason out of that which was without reason.

But if by the spirit is meant the life of will and thought proceeding from God's infinite Love and Wisdom, like heat and light from the spiritual sun of a spiritual world, and flowing down into human minds on earth as into its formed receptacles, —then we must regard these systems as offering no place for such a content. As Swedenborg with his powerful and awful directness and clearness states it:

Those who say that they believe in an invisible Divine, which they call the Being of the universe from which all things had their existence, and reject belief in regard to the Lord, are shown *by experience* that they believe in no God; because the invisible Divine is to them something like nature in her first principles, which is not an object of faith and love because it is not an object of thought (*Heaven and Hell*, n. 3).

That is, it is like looking upon vacancy for our object of vision, or like endeavoring to feel the throbs of affection beating upon us from a problem in geometry. Even the eternal rule of three we cannot turn into a God whom we can love and worship, nor can we from a multiplicity of such rules, conceive of the evolution of motion, of a world and of man.







LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 029 798 890 6